

# **Governing and Shaping Your Agenda**

**Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour  
National Governors Association  
November 13, 2004**

## **Articulating basic values and a vision for your administration**

- It is important to pick out a few key words that summarize your basic premise for governing and have those words become the framework for all of your administration's communication. As usual, simple and conversational words are much more effective.
- In 2000, President Bush used key words like: restoring "honor" and "integrity" to the Oval Office and "compassionate" governing to reflect the feelings of the post-Clinton years. In 2004, the President used words like "strength" and "spreading freedom" to articulate the post-9/11 mentality.
- As I began my administration earlier this year, I used words like "strong leadership" and "working together" to communicate a decisive decision-making style and a willingness to work with the Legislature - both traits Mississippians thought had been lacking in Jackson.

- It is also helpful to begin your administration with actions that support your key words. One of the first things I did shortly after my election was to hold several public meetings with members of the Mississippi Legislature. This supported our theme of “working together” to solve problems.
- First impressions of public officials are no different to people than the first impressions they get from meeting a stranger on the street. That first impression is very important and it rarely changes. That is why your choices about key words and actions early in your administration are so important.

### **Setting a clear agenda and first-year priorities/strategies**

- In many ways the first year of an administration must be the continuation of the conversation with the public that began with the campaign. People must recognize that campaign promises have transformed into gubernatorial priorities.

- I initiated “Haley’s Plan” during my campaign and converted many of its features into our first legislative agenda – using virtually the same wording in some cases.
- Having a long laundry list of proposals is fine, but the media can only consume a handful of items at a time. Therefore, it is important to focus publicly on just a few items. I had a legislative agenda of more than 20 items, but our public message focused almost exclusively on bringing a job creation climate to Mississippi: tort reform, workforce development initiatives and keeping taxes low.
- It is also important to schedule your message. Time is one of the most important parts to political communication. Dividing the year into message segments helps discipline you and your administration in what you are saying to the public. Since there will always be unexpected news events that are out of your control, it is important to have a schedule in place for the news events you do control. There are only so many uncluttered days to effectively communicate and only so many days that your busy schedule allows you effective media time.
- It also takes time to have enough repetition behind a message to make an impact. There was a reason you ran your campaign ads over and over and the same goes for

your administration's earned media message. It will take several weeks of saying the same thing again and again to register with the public. A good rule of thumb is that if your staff cannot recite your entire speech, you haven't said it enough.

- Planning for the first year is critical because it is usually the only year in which a governor can set the agenda almost exclusively. Subsequent years are usually a product of differing agendas and pressing problems that need immediate attention and election years are usually consumed by political posturing and wedge issues.

### **Crafting your major messages (inaugural, state-of-the-state, executive budget)**

- Nothing is more important to setting the tone of your administration and communicating a message to the public than the triumvirate of early addresses a governor makes. The inaugural address, the state-of-the-state address and the announcement of an executive budget are huge, built-in advantages governors have that carry high risk and high reward.

- Your inauguration and your inaugural address in particular, are an ad campaign from you to the people of your state. They have nothing to do with policy, but everything to do with vision. It is the last time you will be able to tell your personal story to a large audience without being overshadowed by the addition of any governing decisions you have made. Your inauguration and your inaugural address should be personal and visionary.
- Your state-of-the-state is where the rhetoric meets the road. State-of-the-state addresses not only give you the opportunity to sell your agenda, but they give you an opportunity to be on record on certain issues. It is a virtual recording session that allows you to formally position yourself in four areas: your issues, issues that are sure to pass, issues that are sure to fail, and issues you wish to avoid. Use this opportunity wisely.
- I strongly believe in using “stats and stories” when communicating policy proposals. Give them the statistics that support your point and then give them a real-life example of that policy in action. During our tort reform debate in the Legislature I frequently cited statistics about increased job losses, lawsuits and insurance costs caused by lawsuit abuse and then followed those with a story about the owner of a trucking company in Mississippi who told me

that for the first time he was spending more money in his business for liability insurance than he was for fuel.

## **Working with your new cabinet**

- Who you appoint to run your agencies and their individual management styles are the most important elements to an effective cabinet. The appointments themselves are as much a form of communication as any other. Whether through geography, background, race, or gender, you say something to the public through your appointments – like it or not.
- My appointment of Tommy Dale Favre to head our Mississippi Department of Employment Security, for example, signaled several messages: my willingness to appoint a woman; my commitment to the often-overlooked Gulf Coast region of our state; and my desire to appoint a business leader in that post.
- The management styles of your appointees are critical to your success as well. Despite detailed, broad-based planning on the part of you and your staff, inevitably, there will always be an unexpected issue arise from an executive agency in such a large labyrinth as state government.

- It is critical to have cabinet members who realize how their agency fits into the big picture; how to spot a potential problem early; how to develop a positive relationship with legislators and the media; how to motivate career bureaucrats; and how to stay on message.
- Pick carefully. Each cabinet member is important. One bad appointee can give the impression of ineptitude for the entire administration.
- Cabinet members must be brought under the umbrella of the Governor's Office regularly to maintain thematic direction, referee disagreements, and prevent "rogue" initiatives and operations.

## **Preparing for emergencies**

- Every governor is faced with something unexpected each year. Emergencies can take the form of real storms – like an incoming hurricane -- or media storms – like the late-night drunk-driving arrest of one of your agency heads. The best way to handle these situations is to have an established procedure in place beforehand.

- Governor's Offices and executive cabinets function just fine from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. However, those hours represent just 27% of the week – which leaves a lot of time for something to go bad when you are at your most unprepared.
- There should be a procedure coordinated by your Chief of Staff that game-plans your administration for decision-making during an emergency: who's in charge, who organizes, who speaks to the media, who alerts key allies, and so on.